



Online community.  
Real-world impact.

## 10 ways to keep online dialogue on topic

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More and more people are turning to the Internet as a venue for civic conversation -- but how can the chaotic, rowdy world of the Net be reconstructed to support considered, constructive deliberation? The first step is just to keep online dialogue on topic, which can be a major challenge in itself.

At a recent conference on Building Democracy Through Online Citizen Deliberation, held at Ohio State University, we got most of the way towards a list of 10 ways to keep online dialogue on topic. I've written up and completed the list:

1. Keep your goal visible. Write a clear statement of the goal of your discussion, and place it on your discussion board or chat window so that it will remain visible to all participants for the duration.

2. Keep your rules visible. Write a succinct list of rules ("no flaming", "maximum 2 mins per comment", etc.) and keep them visible on your discussion board or chat window.

3. Use moderation effectively -- and sparingly. An effective moderator can help keep conversation on track by limiting off-topic conversation, but will be most effective if she is sparing in her interventions.

4. Open a parking lot. Face-to-face facilitators sometimes create a "parking lot" -- a space to write down comments or ideas that are off-topic, but still need to be acknowledged or documented. A virtual parking lot (perhaps a separate web page or discussion thread) can play an analogous role.

5. Create an alternative channel for free-form input. If your discussion is the only opportunity for participants to have their say, they will be highly motivated to bring a wide range of ideas, interests and views to the table -- even if some of these comments are outside the scope of your discussion. By providing an alternative channel (like a suggestion box or feedback form) for input, you give participants a way of voicing comments that don't fit into your dialogue process, and increase the odds that your discussion will stay on track.

6. Offer outside spaces for outside discussion. Your participants are likely to want an opportunity to discuss the issues that they are dropping into your suggestion box or parking lot. Creating an "off topic" forum or e-mail list -- a place to discuss all the odds and ends that don't fit into your main discussion -- can help keep your dialogue focussed.

7. Try and try again. An iterative approach to dialogue -- that is, multiple phases of conversation, each with a clear goal, start, and end point -- is more likely to maintain focus. Each phase of the dialogue can have its own distinct focus, and you can either narrow or broaden the scope of each phase in response to what you learned in the previous phase.

8. Be a role model. If you're moderating a discussion, you have to be more restrained about injecting off-topic comments or anecdotes than any of the other participants. That doesn't mean suppressing your personality -- the occasional joke can be a great ice-breaker -- but pick your digressions wisely, and keep them short. The more focused you can be, the more focused your discussion will be.

9. Reframe off-topic comments. Rather than pointing your finger and dismissing a comment as off-topic, try to reframe it so that it leads the group back into your main discussion. Even if you have to get creative: "Well it's interesting you mention Madonna's new single, because of course THE Madonna is a huge figure in the Catholic church, and the Catholic church has been a big influence on anti-poverty policy. Does anyone else have thoughts about how community groups can help address poverty?"

10. Redefine "on topic". The most innovative solutions to a policy problem or dialogue dilemma often fall outside the pre-defined alternatives on the table, or the pre-defined scope of the conversation itself. When keeping conversation "on topic" it's helpful to take the broadest possible perspective on what your topic really is, so you don't lose any of these "outside the box" gems.

*For the original, full version of this article, see <http://www.socialsignal.com/keep-on-topic>*



## About us

### Online strategies for real-world success.

We know the web inside and out. But we also know that your organization's goals come first. Our combination of communications skills, technical expertise and community experience gives us a unique ability to envision and implement the best solutions for your organization.

We bridge the worlds of strategic communications and web development, assembling and managing the team that's best suited to your particular goals and requirements. Turn to Social Signal to harness the power of the latest digital communications tools – and of the best technology providers – in the service of your mission.

### **Social Signal builds online communities.**

We develop and implement leading-edge strategies for online community-building.

### **Social Signal engages your audience and stakeholders.**

We plan, set up and manage a wide range of online participation processes, from formal consultations to community dialogues.

### **Social Signal helps you make the most of blogging.**

We can help you translate your public relations strategy into a distinctive online voice.

### **Social Signal helps you communicate when the computer's off.**

From a single, powerful speech to a strategy that integrates your on- and offline communications, Social Signal can help.

## Our principals

### **Alexandra Samuel, CEO**

Alexandra combines hands-on experience implementing online strategies with an extensive research background in digital democracy, e-governance and Internet activism. Her recent projects include managing the online launch of telecentre.org and developing the online community strategy for NetSquared.org. Alexandra holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Harvard University, where her research focused on the creative frontiers of online political engagement.

### **Rob Cottingham, President**

Rob is a seasoned communications strategist who is known online as an e-campaigning innovator, and offline as one of Canada's leading speechwriters. His recent projects include creating the Confeederation election blog aggregator and writing the final report for the Prime Minister's External Advisory Committee on Cities and Communities. Rob maintains a long-running blog at robcottingham.ca and writes SpeechList, a free e-mail newsletter on speechwriting.

